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ABSTRACT

This booklet contains suggestions for writing and speaking about people with disabilities to help place the primary focus on the identity of an individual who has an entire range of human experiences, rather than on the individual's disability. The booklet begins with three suggestions for writing about people with disabilities: emphasize the individual; be accurate; and portray people as active participants in daily life. The booklet then presents definitions and examples of preferred language to use when writing or speaking about AIDS, the blind or visually impaired, congenital disability, deaf or hard of hearing, developmental disability, disability, Down Syndrome, handicap, learning disability, mental disability, mental disorder, mental retardation, spastic, seizure, speech disorder, and stroke. (Contains 17 references and a 17-item list of resources.) (RS)

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PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST:

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING ABOUT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

As we write about or refer to people with disabilities, it is important that we put the person first, before describing their disability, by using positive language, appropriate portrayals, and correct terminology. The recommended suggestions that follow are meant to help us place the primary focus on the identity of an individual who has an entire range of human experiences, rather than on the individual's disability.

The following are suggestions for writing about people with disabilities:

- Unless it is critical to your story, emphasize the individual, not his or her disability. For instance, you may want to write about work or quality of life issues, such as accessibility or transportation.
- When writing about or discussing disabilities, be accurate in your description. For instance, people who have had polio and experience after-effects years later have a postpolio disability. They do not have a disease.
- Portray people with disabilities as active participants in daily life, working and interacting with people without disabilities. This may facilitate open communication and inclusion.

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Definitions and Preferred Phrases

Listed below are definitions and examples of preferred languages that refer to the person first and promote positive attitudes toward people with disabilities. For example, in keeping with the tone of preferred phrases and words, avoid writing or saying "suffers from," "crippled with," "victim," "unfortunate," "pitiful."

AIDS:

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is caused by the HIV virus and results in the loss of the body's immune system. In order to have full-blown AIDS an individual must be: 1) HIV positive, and 2) have a T-cell count of less than 200 or one or more of 40 opportunistic diseases, such as cancer, pneumonia or tuberculosis.[1]

Use: Person with AIDS or people living with AIDS
Avoid: Victim of AIDS

Blind Or Visually Impaired:

Visually impaired: low vision, partially sighted; individual has trouble seeing or reading ordinary print even with corrective lenses (glasses or contacts). Blind: without the power of sight; unable to see. Legal Blindness: A distance of visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye when the eye is fully corrected with optical lenses.[2,3]

Use: Person who is blind; woman who is visually impaired; older person who has low vision
Avoid: Blind woman

Congenital Disability:

Disabilities that are present at birth but which may not be evident until later in life. Congenital disabilities are not always hereditary.[3]

Use: Person with a congenital disability
Avoid: Man with a birth defect

Deaf Or Hard Of Hearing:

Deaf: Deafness can be defined as the inability to hear speech, with or without a hearing aid; a severe hearing loss that impairs normal communication through the use and understanding of speech.

Hard of hearing: describes people with any degree of hearing loss ranging from mild to profound. They can understand some speech sounds, with or without a hearing aid. Most people who are hard of hearing are oralists, although a small number learn sign language. Generally, they participate in society by using their residual hearing plus hearing aids, speech reading, and assistive technology to aid communication.[4]

Use: Person who is deaf; AARP member who is hard of hearing
Avoid: Deaf member

DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY:

A wide range of lifelong physical or cognitive conditions occurring before age 22 and causing substantial functional impairments in three or more major types of activity, such as self-care, mobility, receptive and expressive language, learning, economic self-sufficiency, self-direction, and independent living.[5]

Use: Member with mental retardation; person with epilepsy; child with seizure disorder; man who has cerebral palsy; people who have a developmental disability
Avoid: "Epileptic"; "crippled" or "retarded"

DISABILITY:

A person with a disability is someone with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities such as walking, speaking, seeing, hearing, breathing, learning, working, or caring for one's self.[6]

Use: Volunteer with a disability; people with disabilities
Avoid: Disabled person; confined to or restricted to a wheelchair

DOWN SYNDROME:

A genetic condition which is caused by the existence of an extra chromosome. Down Syndrome frequently results in mental retardation and is characterized by developmental delays in intelligence, physical growth, and language skills.[7]

Use: Person with Down syndrome
Avoid: "Mongol" or "Mongoloid"

HANDICAP:

The resulting personal, social, and environmental disadvantages experienced by persons with disabilities that prevent or restrict participation in everyday activities, such as work or recreation. This term is NOT synonymous with disability.[8]

Use: The stairs are a handicap for him because he uses a wheelchair
Avoid: Mr. Smith is handicapped

LEARNING DISABILITY:

Any number of learning difficulties experienced by children of average or greater than average intelligence; manifests itself in school-aged children and results in difficulties in accomplishing specific tasks, such as reading and writing.[9]

Use: Janet Jones has a learning disability.
Avoid: "Slow learner" or "retarded"

MENTAL DISABILITY:

The term "mental disability" includes four categories: psychiatric, mental retardation, learning disability, and physical head trauma.[10]

Use: Person with a psychiatric disability; child with mental retardation; Mr. Jones has traumatic brain injury; person with a mental disability; person with a cognitive impairment; member who has a learning disability
Avoid: "Retarded," "learning disabled"

MENTAL DISORDER:

A behavorial or psychological syndrome that causes significant distress (a painful symptom) or disability (impairment in one or more important areas of functioning), or a significantly increased risk of suffering, death, or pain, or an important loss of freedom. The syndrome is considered to be a manifestation of some behavorial, psychological, or biological dysfunction in the person.[11]

Use: Man with an emotional disorder; woman with a psychiatric illness; child with a psychiatric disability
Avoid: "Crazy," "nuts," "demented"

MENTAL RETARDATION:

Mental retardation manifests before the age of 18 and refers to substantial limitations in present functioning. It is characterized by significantly sub-average intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with related limitations in two or more of the following applicable adaptive skill areas: communication, self-care, home living, social skills, community use, self-direction, health and safety, functional academics, leisure and work.[12]

Use: Person with mental retardation, daughter with mental retardation
Avoid: "Retarded"

SPASTIC:

A spastic condition is: characterized by involuntary spasms; muscles are stiff and movements are awkward.[13]

Use: Ms. Smith has a spastic condition in her left leg
Avoid: The man is spastic

SEIZURE:

An episode caused by a sudden disturbance in the brain; if seizures are recurrent, it is referred to as a seizure disorder.[14]

Use: Person with epilepsy; child with a seizure disorder
Avoid: "Epileptic"

SPEECH DISORDER:

Speech disorders affect how people talk and understand language. They include stuttering, articulation disorders, and voice disorders.[15]

Use: Member who has a speech disorder
Avoid: "Dumb," "mute"

STROKE:

Produced by a blood clot that lodges in an artery and blocks the flow of blood to a portion of the brain; also results from bleeding into the brain, although this is much less common.[16]

Use: Volunteer who is a stroke survivor
Avoid: Stroke victim

REMEMBER: THINK "PERSON FIRST"!

How we speak and write helps us to focus on persons with disabilities as individuals and not on their disabilities.

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RESOURCES

For a free copy of the following publications for persons with disabilities, write to:

AARP Fulfillment
601 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20049

Please be sure to include stock number(s) with your order.

- *Disability Initiative Mission Statement* Stock No. D14973
- *Facts About Vision Loss* Stock No. D14870
- *Facts About Hearing Loss* Stock No. D14869
- *Resource Guide for Persons Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired* Stock No. D14926
- *Resource Guide for Persons Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing* Stock No. D14925
- *Facts About People with Disabilities* Stock No. D15065
- *So Youve Hired Someone Who Is Deaf or Hard of Hearing* Stock No. D15122
- *Accommodating Persons with Disabilities: Checklist for the Staff and Volunteers of AARP* Stock No. D15374
- *Facts About Adult Children with Developmental Disabilities and Their Families* Stock No. D15469
- *Facts About Designing Publications for Readers with Low Vision* Stock No. D15470
- *AARP Product Report: Canes* Stock No. D14916
- *AARP Product Report: PERS (Personal Emergency Response System)* Stock No. D12905
- *AARP Product Report: Walkers* Stock No. D14390
- *AARP Product Report: Wheelchairs* Stock No. D14049
- *The Doable Renewable Home: Making Your Home Fit Your Needs* Stock No. D12470
- *The Perfect Fit* Stock No. D13849
- *Disability Initiative Information Packet* Packet includes several Disability Initiative publications Stock No. D15262

AARP's most requested publications about aging issues are available on audiocasstette. For a free brochure write to:
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The following open-captioned videos may be borrowed (free of charge) from AARP. For further information write to:
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Washington, DC 20049

Memory: The Long and Short of It Stock No. D14188

Your Future — Who Decides? Stock No. D13888

A *Catalyst for Change: AARPs Women's Initiative* Stock No. D15054

The following publications are available in large print or Braille. For a free copy write to:
AARP
Disability Initiative
601 E Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20049

Available in Large Print:
Disability Initiative Mission Statement

Available in Braille:
Resource Guide for Persons Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Resource Guide for Persons Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired

About the Disability Initiative

The Disability Initiative seeks to raise awareness of the needs of midlife and older persons with disabilities and to promote accessibility to AARP's programs and services. The Initiative advocates and supports programs, policies, and legislation that improve the status of all people with disabilities.

AARP also has a variety of resources about various disabilities, including product reports on assistive devices, and information about how to modify the physical structure of a residence to accommodate mobility impairments. Many of AARP's publications are available on audiocassette for persons who are blind or visually impaired. Some vidoetapes are open-captioned for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing.

For more information contact:
Disability Initiative • AARP • 601 E Street, NW • Washington, DC 20049
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